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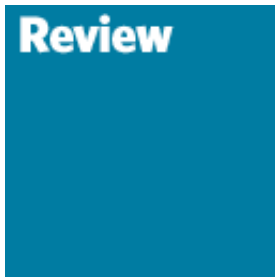
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Fiction

# A so-called life

Rowland Manthorpe on The Man of My Dreams | The Afghan | Pound for Pound

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**Sunday August 19, 2007**  
[The Observer](#)

**The Man of My Dreams** by Curtis Sittenfeld. Picador £7.99

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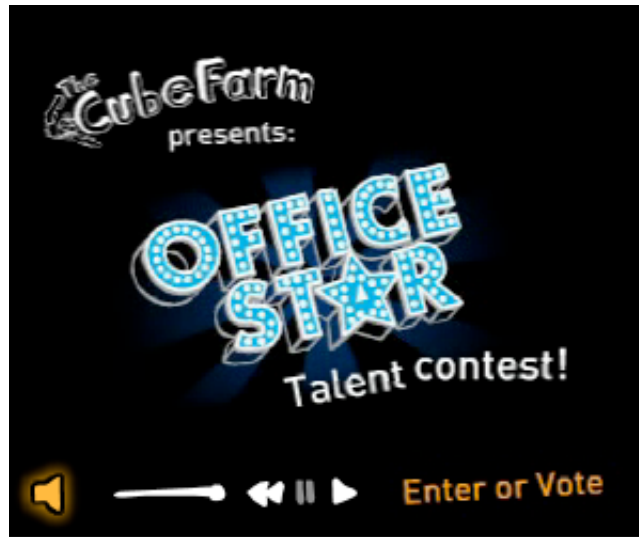
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The inner worlds of the young and middle class - so mundane, yet so deeply felt - are among the hardest for any author to realise. For most of this stylish novel, Curtis Sittenfeld comes as close as is humanly possible, drawing us into the celebrity-inflected imaginings of Hannah Gavener, the classic model of self-conscious teenage girlhood. We first meet her as a 14-year-old, hurt and confused by her parents' divorce. Over the next decade and a half, we follow her neurotic wanderings in the murky waters of love, friendship and family. So far, so glossy magazine, but Sittenfeld's cutglass prose and razor-sharp observations take her work to another level. A shame, then, that Hannah's gloomy self-obsession becomes so unsympathetic. For all its humour, this novel is ultimately joyless.

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### **The Afghan** by Frederick Forsyth. Corgi £6.99

The Afghan is Izmat Khan, Guantanamo Bay inmate and Taliban killer, scion of murderous Islam. 'The Afghan' is also British Colonel Mike Martin, a child of empire able to pass as an Arab. When British operatives in Islamabad uncover news of a chilling plot on the scale of 9/11, Martin volunteers to attempt what we must all hope is possible: a penetration of al-Qaeda. He will pass himself off as Khan, prayer-perfect and filled with hate. Forsyth's interest is less in the psychology of the transformation than in the forces that meet in such a mission. Confronting technological and ideological complexity with verve and clarity, he marshals a narrative of global scope. Wedding a superb command of detail to a story of pace and power, Forsyth has written a counterterrorism primer-thriller of chilling relevance.

### **Pound for Pound** by FX Toole. Vintage £7.99

The author of the short story that inspired Million Dollar Baby came to writing late. FX Toole's literary career was so short, indeed, that he was unable to finish his only full-length novel before he died in 2002 at the age of 72. Pound for Pound, completed posthumously with the help of Toole's family, is the story of Dan Cooley, an old Irish trainer, and Chicky Garza, a young Tex-Mex fighter: betrayed, both seek salvation in boxing's bloody fires. Writers, like actors, harp on the virtues of 'being there', but their 'method' can never approach lived reality: Toole spent his whole life in the fight game and every line he writes fizzes with authenticity. Lines from 'Danny Boy' open this book: like that song, it is both hard-boiled and sentimental, as bittersweet as only the street can be.

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